DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 129 827 SP 010 544

AUTHOR Eisen, George
TITLE The Role of Women in Ancient Fertility Cults and the Origin of Sports.
PUB DATE Jun 76
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented to the Annual Convention of the North American Society for Sport History (4th, Eugene, Oregon, June 16-19, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Ancient History; *Athletics; Dance; *Mythology; *Religious Factors; Social History; Womens Athletics; *Womens Studies
IDENTIFIERS Agricultural Cults; *Fertility Cults; Sport History

ABSTRACT

Sports historians have developed a general understanding that the origins of sports activities lie rooted in the cults of antiquity. More specifically, it can be seen that ancient religious customs and festivals in honor of fertility goddesses were transformed into sports activities in which women figured prominently. Throughout the Mediterranean basin, cults of the Earth Mother (Magna Mater, Gaia, Isis, Demeter) were closely associated with fertility and agriculture. Festivals held in honor of these goddesses involved singing, acrobatic dancing, and racing. Women, as devotees of these deities, were the major participants in bare-foot fertility races, ball games, and cult rituals, which later developed into nonreligious folk games. It would thus seem that women's contributions to the development of sports and games were more important than previously acknowledged by scholars. (MB)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED129827

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT FERTILITY CULTS AND THE ORIGIN OF SPORTS

A Paper Presented to the Fourth Annual Convention of the North American Society for Sport History. (June 16-19, 76).

by

George Eisen

Sport historians have arrived at the general understanding that the origins of sport activities lie in the cults of antiquity. Noted scholars such as Diem, Culin, and Simri, for instance, have maintained that games are, not in themselves conscious inventions, but rather survivals from religious rituals.[1] Henderson supported their belief:

> As we delve back into the records of ancient civilizations, we find that folk customs and religious ceremonies, undertaken not as idle pastimes, but as grim supplications to various deities, are the roots from which sports have sprung.[2]

These scholars, however, have only suggested in rather general terms the origin of sports rooted in religious cults. It is the intent of this paper to focus more specifically on the central role of fertility cults in the evolution of sports; ancient religious customs and festivals in honor of fertility goddesses were transformed into various sport activities in which women figured prominently.

Like many primitive peoples, the ancient Mediterranean cultures in their early stages seem to have worshipped a universal mother-goddess. She was

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

SP 010 544

associated with earth, agriculture, fertility, and in some cases, with death. The background of mother-goddess tradition often explains the particular form taken by myths in which these goddesses were involved.[3] Menghin suggested that a mother-goddess had been celebrated everywhere as the Magna Mater or Mother Earth.[4] The Egyptian depiction of the universe, for example, described Isis as the earth itself. She was the sister and wife of Osiris, but gradually she became greater than her spouse in her role as the eternal Queen of Heaven and the Earth Mother.[5] Evans,[6] who supported Menghin's theory, stated that the numerous goddess images discovered in Crete represent the Great Mother who is identical to the Earth Goddess Cybele of Asia Minor. The myth of the Greek Earth Goddess, Gaia, seems to resemble the Egyptian version; Gaia (earth) married to Uranos (heaven). The Mother Goddess, Harrison observed, was almost necessarily envisaged as the Earth.[7] The ancient Dove-priestesses at Dodona were the first to chant the Litany:

> Zeus was, Zeus is, Zeus shall be, o great Zeus
> Earth sends up fruits,
> So praise we Earth the Mother.[8]

The two lines, Harrison continued, have no necessary connection; it may be that their order is inverted and that long before the Dove-priestesses sang the praise of Zeus they had chanted their hymn to the Mother Earth Goddess.[9]

Mehl,[10] who investigated the matriarchal influence in Greek athletics, also pointed out the similarity between the earth goddess of fertility and the Magna Mater Terrae whom he identified with Gaia, Rhea, and Cybele.

Earth and fertility were closely associated concepts in the thoughts of the ancients and it is understandable that through a religious evolution the

Mother-Earth Goddesses were transformed into fertility and later mortuary deities. The ascription of the discovery of agriculture to a goddess was suggested by the prominent part which women took in primitive agriculture.[11] It is probable that women, as a consequence of the natural division of work, can be credited with the discovery of agriculture. Harrison commented that:

> To the modern mind it is surprising to find the processes of agriculture conducted in the main by women, and mirroring themselves in the figures of women-goddesses. But in days when man was mainly concerned with hunting and fighting it was natural enough that agriculture and the ritual attendant on it should fall to the women.[12]

This assumption seems to be supported by many instances of primitive tribes of Australia, India, and South America.[13]

Some indications as to the nature of the relationship of the Mother Goddess to agriculture and fertility can be found in the eastern Mediterranean mythological accounts. According to the Egyptian mythology, for example, Isis, as the Mother Goddess, taught Osiris the practice of agriculture. Thus, she was worshipped as fertility goddess, symbolizing the rich land of Egypt. Ions[14] claims that Isis, as a sort of Mother Goddess, absorbed the attributes of other goddesses by becoming involved in funerary mythology. In the cults of Egyptian agricultural and fertility goddesses, women often were identified as the votaries of these deities. This identification went so far as actually calling them by the names of goddesses such as Isis, Hathor, or Neith.[15] The priestesses of Egypt thus became involved in agricultural ceremonies and festivals in which they assumed the role of the sole representatives of fertility goddesses.

In classical Greece, the transition of the concept of mother goddess to that of Earth, Fertility, and Death was symbolized by the great triad of the mysteries of Eleusis. Demeter whose name may allude to De-Mater, was interpreted by some scholars as Mother Goddess, symbolizing the Earth Mother. Her daughter, Persephone, was the returning goddess from the nether world and the symbol of the rebirth through the new corn; and Triptolemos was said to have brought Demeter's and Persephone's gift of grain into the world.[16] Frazer assumed that Demeter was not merely the Earth Goddess but also the goddess of agriculture and fertility.[17] Her main festival was celebrated at the Eleusian mysteries. The celebration of the goddesses of corn, Demeter and Persephone, originated in the tradition that the whole world was once desolated by famine which the Athenians sought to end by offering sacrifice. The famine ceased following the sacrifice; to show their gratitude, the farmers of Attica offered the first fruits of barley and wheat to the goddesses. The festival was usually treated as if it were a festival by itself. However, Harrison viewed it as the mere derivation of the ancient Haloa festival which was conducted mostly by women and was sacred to Demeter.[18] In explaining the name, Pausanias commented that the Haloa maidens carried first-fruits from Athens to Eleusis and engaged in sports upon the threshing-floors. Harpocration[19] explained the essence of this festival: "The Haloa gets its name, according to Philochorus, from the fact that people hold sports at the threshing-floors." "The sports held were of course incidental to the business of threshing, but it was these sports that constituted the actual festival."[20] First the

people held rustic festivals on their threshing-floors, and later these ceremonies were developed into all Athenian celebrations in Eleusis.

In the light of the previously discussed evidence it appears that the mother goddess cults of the eastern Mediterranean through agricultural - fertility festivals promoted the rise of various sports and games. Women, as the votaries of fertility deities, fulfilled a significant role in fertility cults and festivals; subsequently, their contribution to the development of sports and games seems to be more important that was previously acknowledged by scholars. Herodotus, the great Greek historian, for instance, reported that the Egyptians had many festivals at different periods of the year connected with the products of the soil.[21] Artifacts of ancient Egypt indeed support these notions. Tombs of the Early and Middle Kingdoms reveal female performers in acrobatic dances, personifying natural forces. Wilkinson contended that many games and sports were probably celebrated by women.[22]

Aristides, who lived in the second century A.D., also mentioned the institution of the Eleusian Games in immediate connection with the offerings of the first-fruits of the corn by maidens.[23] These famous religious mysteries of the Greek world were founded by Eumolpus for the propitiation of Demeter and Persephone to ensure good crops within the year. The assumption of Frazer that the Eleusian Games were of later origin than the annual ceremonies does not contradict the theory that sports and games were rooted in agricultural cults.[24] These ancient rituals were conducted by

women in an effort to control the seasons magically. Nilsson[25] mentioned that virgins walked and ran around the vine-hills at the time of the Aiora festival:

> It was connected with the myth of Icarius, who taught the culture of the wine, and with the Anthesteria. It was rustic merrymaking, Youth leaped on skin sacks filled with wine, and the girls were swung in swings, a custom which is common in rustic festivals and may perhaps be interpreted as a fertility charm.[26]

He refered further to the importance of the customs in which virgins participated in harvest and plowing ceremonies at the time of their menstrual period. The belief in the magical powers of the menstrual blood apparently was deep-rooted among ancient Greacian farmers, for Democritus the great philosopher required that at the time of their menstrual period, young girls should run three times round the fields that were ready for harvesting. He thought that the menstrual blood contained a charge of fertile energy which was a perfect antidote against the insects that devour corn.[27]

Keresztenyi surmised that these ancient rituals probably included barefoot fertility races of maidens on the fields as a part of the worship of the Earth Mother.[28] Mehl[29] maintained that the foot-races of maidens was a thanks-offering for fertility. He further suggested that foot-races at the Heraean festivals were remnants of ancient agricultural customs. The barefoot running symbolized the new life giving strength which penetrates the earth through the moving female body. The other link between Earth Goddess and sports can be seen in the crowning of the girl victor by olive leaves. The crown, Mehl pointed out, was taken from the wild olive tree, the most precious gift of the Earth Goddess. Pausanias described also a Spartan custom wherein a special race was held by eleven maidens. The race was held in honor of the

fertility deity Dionysus Colonatas at Colona by the women who were called Dionysiades:[30]

> To this hero sacrifices are offered before they are offered to the god by the daughters of Dionysus and the daughters of Leucippus. For the other eleven ladies who are named daughters of Dionysus there is held a foot race; this custom came to Sparta from Delphi.[31]

The brief comment of Pausanias does not reveal the way the festival was celebrated or the manner in which the women raced, though it was linked perhaps to the fertility rites of Dionysus.

Simri alluded also to burial ceremonies in which ball games of women became a part of the cult of the death.[32] This point was also illustrated by Frazer. He interpreted the symbolic burial of seeds in the earth in order to spring up to new and higher life with human destiny, where for man, too, the burial is just a transformative stage to some brighter world.[33]

A final conclusion is that many of the folk games played by women were ritualistic in origin. The rites in various fertility festivals of antiquity illustrated the importance of women as symbols of fecundity. Games and rustic physical pursuits of women,with their seminal religious motivation, evolved gradually into the precursors of modern sports.

Footnotes

1. Siegfried Mendner, Das Ballspiele in Leben der Voelker, (Muenster: Achendorff, 1956). Diem wrote in the introduction of the book; S. Culin, Games of the Orient, (Vermont, Ruttland: Tuttle & Co. 1960), p. xviii.; Uriel Simri, "The Religious Functions of Ball Games in Various Cultures," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of West Virginia, 1967), p. 150.

2. Robert W. Henderson, Ball, Bat and Bishop, (New York: Rockport Press Inc., 1947), p. 3.

3. Veronica Ions, Egyptian Mythology, (New York: Hamlyn House, 1968), p. 38.

4. Oswald Menghin, Weltgeschichte der Steinzeit, (Wien, Aistria: A. Schroll & Co., 1931), p. 148.

5. Charles Seltman, Women in Antiquity, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1956), p. 44.

6. Arthur Evans Sir, The Palace of Minos at Knossos, (New York: Biblo & Tannen, 1964), vol 2, p. 277.

7. Jane E. Harrison, Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1903), p. 263.

8. Pausanias, Description of Greece, trans. J. G. Frazer, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), X. 12:10.

9. Harrison, Prolegomena to the . . ., p. 263.

10. Erwin Mehl, "Die Mutterrichtlichen Heraien als Vorlaufer und Grundlage der Vaterrechtlichen Olympischen Spiele," Proceedings of the International Seminar for the History of Physical Education and Sports (Wien, Austria: 1974), p. 4.

11. F. B. Jevon, Introduction to the History of Religion, (London: 1896), p. 240.

12. Harrison, Prolegomena to the . . ., p. 272.

13. James Frazer Sir, The Golden Bough, (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1955), vol 1, pp. 92-112.

14. Ions, Egyptian Religion, p. 62.

15. A. M. Blackman, "On the Position of Women in the Ancient Egyptian Hierarchy," Journal of Egyptian Archeology 7 (1921):8-33.

16. Joseph Campbell, Occidental Mythology, (New York: The Viking Press, 1962), p. 49.

17. Frazer, The Golden Bough, vol 1, p. 461.

18. Harrison, Prolegomena to the . . ., p. 150.

19. Valerius Harpocration, Lexicon in Decem Oratores Atticos, (Groeningen: Bouma's Boekhuis, 1969), See under Haloa.

20. Harrison, Prolegomena to the . . ., p. 151.

21. Herodotus, The History of, trans. B. Perrin (New York: Appleton, 1893), vol 2, p. 79.

22. J. G. Wilkinson, The Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1878), vol 2, p. 442.

23. Aelius Aristides, Panathenaikos, (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1968).

24. Frazer, The Golden Bough, vol 1, pp. 78-87.

25. Martin Nilsson, A History of Greek Religion, (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1963), pp. 64-65; Greek Folk Religion, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press,,1972), p. 28.

26. Ibid., Greek Folk Religion, p. 33.

27. Andre Bonnard, Greek Civilization, (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1957), p. 13.

28. Jozsef Keresztenyi, Az Olimpiak Toertenete, (Budapest: Gondolat Kiado, 1972), p. 30.

29. Mehl, "Die Mutterechtlichen Heraien . . .," p. 4.

30. Pausanias, Description of Greece, XIII. 7; Thomas Woody, Life and Education in Early Societies, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1949), p. 245.

31. Pausanias, Description of Greece, XIII. 7.

32. Simri, "The Religious and Magical Functions of . . .," p. 150.

33. Frazer, The Golden Bough, vol 1, p. 90.